BOOK REVIEW

Jussi Backman's

Complicated Presence: Heidegger and the Postmetaphysical Unity of Being

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Jussi Backman, *Complicated Presence: Heidegger and the Postmetaphysical Unity of Being*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015. 342 pages.

In an early work entitled *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche declares of Thales that "what drove him […] was a metaphysical conviction which had its origin in a mystic intuition. We meet it in every philosophy, together with the ever-renewed attempts at a more suitable expression, this proposition that 'all things are one.'"[1] If Nietzsche is right, what justifies naming Thales the first philosopher is not the *answer* he proposed (what Nietzsche calls his "water-hypothesis") but the *question* this answer was supposed to resolve and, beyond this, the metaphysical *conviction* concerning the unity of being that the question presupposes.

If so, we should expect that the question of the unity (and multiplicity) of being would be the very kind of question that post-metaphysical

thought discards. *Complicated Presence* argues, on the contrary, that this question permeates the entirety of Heidegger's corpus. One could take this as suggesting that, to the extent that Heidegger remained committed to the question concerning the unity of being, he was unable to overcome the very metaphysics he claimed to deconstruct. Backman's intention is, on the contrary, to argue that the vocabulary of ontological unity in Heidegger is *not* a surreptitious resurgence of a traditional metaphysical structure that privileges the one over the many, but a critical transformation of that very structure (6). This unity is always differentiated. It is the unity of unity *and* difference, of presence *and* absence, of disclosing *and* withdrawing. Whereas metaphysics understands being as the universal beingness common to the manifold of beings, post-metaphysical thinking attempts to think presence in its complicated singularity as the singularity of the event of beyng. In the following essay I hope to convince the reader that *Complicated Presence* is one of the most thought-provoking recent books on Heidegger, a complicated but essential contribution.

I. PRESENCE, UNITY, AND COMPLICATION

Ordinarily, whatever we deem complicated is *difficult* and it is so because it is *complex*. Thus, this notion plays at the intersection of epistemology and metaphysics: with respect to knowledge, it is a negative term since it suggests that we do not understand, or understand only dimly, what is at stake. It is so because the complex harbors a multiplicity that prevents us from seeing the unity of a thing or a phenomenon. A complicated issue, for instance, is one that has a multiplicity of contributing factors such that this very multiplicity makes it difficult to fully understand. By contrast, to grasp this issue would be a matter of discovering its unity, of returning the multiple to simplicity. How then can presence, which Backman understands as unity, be complicated? This question is ontological as well as hermeneutical. What Backman calls "complicated presence" designates "the complicity and mutual correspondence, the replying-to-one-another – between presence and its multidimensional background context.

The event of contextualization that opens up meaningful presence *as* complicated is itself essentially *simple*" (9).

Complication should then be understood in the sense of *com-plicare*: folding together. The unity of being is thus complicated because it is a tensional, referring, and exceeding structure that does not exclude difference and opposition but is, on the contrary, based on them. In that sense, complication reverses Parmenides' movement of explication, which can be understood as the movement of unfolding the apparent multiplicity of beings into an ultimate simplicity of presence as such. Heidegger's later thought can thus be understood as unfolding this presence as a folding together of multiple dimensions of meaningfulness. "These dimensions make the presence of the thing meaningful in a singular way; however, they are not themselves implicitly included in this presence but remain in the background, implicit" (8). To support this claim, Backman reviews Heidegger's entire corpus.

Complicated Presence covers a great deal of material and I cannot comment on each of Backman's detailed analyses. Instead, I shall focus on three crucial moments: a) Dasein's unity as timeliness (*Zeitlichkeit*), b) the event, and c) the fourfold.

a) *Dasein's unity* is ecstatic; that is to say, it is the interplay of a multiplicity of temporal dimensions that generates Dasein's openness to meaningful presence as a situated, contextual, and *unique* instant of vision (*Augenblick*). Thought in terms of timeliness, Dasein's unity (care) is not the linear juxtaposition of a past that is no more, a present that is, and a future that is not yet; rather, it is the *unity of their contemporaneity*. Backman rightly insists that "the key to understanding the structure of timeliness is to discard spatial notions of linearity and succession and to think the ecstases in their "at-once" character without thereby reducing them to a simultaneity in the sense of simple co-presence or accessibility in one and the same now" (86).

"Already-having-been" is Dasein's ineradicable factical background which is meaningful in terms of the finite possibilities for being-ahead. Already-having-been arises from forthcoming (*Zukunft*). Futurity structures Dasein's possibilities but it is not subordinate to actuality,

which is to say that forthcoming is not to be understood as a deficient mode of what *lacks* presence and perhaps will never be; rather, futurity is a dimension of non-presence.

"Presenting" (*Gegenwärtigen*) is openness and receptivity to the meaningfully situated present. It is made possible in terms of forthcoming possibilities and the factical background from which these possibilities emerge (85). On this ground, time is neither flow nor linear. Because of the folding of these temporal ecstases, the present is without completion and presence does not have the fullness of simplicity. Thus, Heidegger's concern for the unity of Dasein doesn't give rise to oneness. But how can we understand this "at-once" character, this contemporaneity that is not simultaneity? In *simultaneity*, one moment of time (the present instant) has preeminence since it contains everything else in it. The unity of *contemporaneity*, however, is permeated by what is not present. Thus contemporaneity (Heidegger talks of "proximity") should not be understood as a fourth ecstasis; rather, it constitutes the horizonal schema of the three temporal ecstases whose unity is found in the mutual dependence of the ecstases.

b) With the thinking of *Ereignis*, Heidegger abandons the transcendental-horizonal approach of *Being and Time* to inaugurate being-historical-thinking. *Ereignis,* in its uniqueness, takes place in a multitude of singular events and articulates both the differential character of being and its unity. The differential corresponds to the background dimension of meaningfulness, the tensional separation of the gods and the humans, the concrete materiality of the earth and the permanence-granting ideality and universality of a shared historical articulation of meaning-relations (a world). Differentiality, however, is also a gathering of what is appropriated; it comprises the event of meaningful presence as a whole (182). As Backman shows, Heidegger's claim according to which "beyng is more than beings" should not be confused with the onto-theological claim according to which a *supreme* being is "most" (in the sense of maximally constant presence). As Heidegger puts it in *Metaphysics and Nihilism*, "it is one thing to metaphysically install being as beingness in a most-beingful…[supreme being] − and another

to experience beyng in terms of the abidance of its truth as the 'most-beingful' in *the* sense that it is precisely not 'a' being and also not supreme, not 'the' absolute" (GA 67: 183).[2] "Beyng is most" must then be understood in terms of its singular instantaneity and spatio-temporal situatedness. It is "at times" and locally. Whereas beings (*das Seiende*) constitute the foreground that metaphysics has cut off from their implicit background distinction, the unity of beyng is a differential and yet indivisible singular unity of foreground and background. In the expressions "presence *and* non-presence," "clearing *and* withdrawing," the conjunction "and" expresses being as *Ereignis*. As Backman puts it, "what now emerges is precisely the previously disregarded *other* of being as presence, i.e., *the background context* of non-presence (being$_2$ [on this terminology, see section III below]) that releases presence into the foreground of immediate accessibility by itself withdrawing" (163). The present is no longer self-sufficient identity but a situational, singular, and historically contextual *event of presencing*. Thus, Dasein and beyng enter into a play of mutual reference or reciprocal appropriation whereby the event of being takes the human being as its recipient, and the human being finds her selfhood in the reception of this givenness.

c) *The fourfold* (*Geviert*) is, argues Backman, the unity of a horizontal axis of excess constituted by two dimensions: on the one hand, the gods and the human beings (mortals) that can be regarded as a temporal axis analogous to the ecstases of forthcoming and already-having-been and, on the other hand, a vertical axis of excess that can be regarded as a special dimension of access within temporal presence and that comprises world (later on called "sky" − *Himmel*) and earth. Backman interprets the divine as the "unattainable, ever non-present dimension of ultimate possibilities toward which the human being is compelled to strive" (142). Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin stresses that neither humans nor the deities are self-contained domains, but rather are in the strife between the superhuman (aims, ideals, and obligations) and the affective nature of human beings in their ability to be receptive to such an orienting dimension.

We can then contrast the earth/world axis with the Aristotelian matter/form. In Aristotle's production-oriented ontology, materiality (*hylē*) is presented in negative terms, as *in*articulate *in*determinacy that *lacks* form and is therefore a mere potential (*dynamis*) for being articulated. By contrast, the earth, for Heidegger, is made explicit in the work of art as the soil that fulfills and bears all meanings and shows that concrete meaningfulness is never exhausted by the universality of determinate articulation. The earth resists any attempt to generalize the cultural paradigms of a historical world. The world is the network of references and involvements within which articulated meaningfulness arises. The world is always the world of a historical people. It is always situated and historical. The earth, however, is trans-epochal; it is not situated, but situates and singularizes. This is why, as Backman observes, Heidegger talks not of *a* world but of *the* earth (148).

It is essential to resist interpreting the earth-world axis alongside the prevalent distinctions of nature/culture or material/spiritual. Earth and world are not substantial beings, but two dimensions at play in the instantiation of meaningful presence in which earth is brought forth into world and world is anchored into earth. In the work of art, earth and world rest in a tensional and oppositional presence. World (articulation) seeks to integrate the earth (materiality) into a network of meaning, to make it thoroughly intelligible. However, in its opacity and indeterminacy earth resists this transparency. This conflict between articulation and resistance is interdependency and reciprocal intertwining, belonging together (150). This is why the work of art has the unity of an event.

II. UNITY, UNIVOCITY, SIMPLICITY, AND SINGULARITY

It follows from this analysis that "presence" cannot be *one* in the way that self-identity defines a substance, since meaningfulness presupposes referentiality which, in turn, requires plurality. Heidegger is indeed concerned with the question of the *unity* of being, but he does so by raising the question of the *uniqueness* of being rather than its unicity. This leads Backman to appeal to a series of terms: oneness, singularity,

uniqueness, simplicity, and identity. I propose to focus on this manifold in order to contrast it with the metaphysical one/many and address the distinctions that this series of terms introduces.

Metaphysically, being is the most universal concept, although its universality is not that of a species or a genus. This is why medieval ontology denoted being as a *transcendental*. Yet being is also common to every being. This is why medieval ontology called it *ens commune*. Transcendence and univocity comprise two possible ways of conceiving it. In either case, however, the concern for the unity of being is a matter of preserving identity and permanence. In the case of immanence (e.g., Epicurus's atomistic theory) atoms are the *archē* of all things, what remains immutable beyond the generation and destruction of compounds. In a dualistic and creationist metaphysics (e.g., Aquinas), the essence of a being stands in potency to a distinct act of existence. Heidegger's post-metaphysical thought does not simply inverse the metaphysical structure and posit multiplicity and complexity as preceding unity and simplicity. Simplicity remains a key concern: "the multiplicity of the fourfold background requires the simplicity of the thing in which it can fold together" (9). Yet "simplicity" is to be distinguished from identity (being one-and-the-same). Simplicity occurs in relationality. Meaningful presence and Dasein's receptivity are irreducibly intertwined. Thus, simplicity is not found in a common denominator. To shift from a language of "unity" to a language of "uniqueness" and "singularity" is to think of unity in its temporal and historical dimension.

Singularity is precisely what the project of a universal and comprehensive unity *cannot* account for. The haecceity or thisness of the individual is, for metaphysics, *ineffable*. Such a singularity is the opposite of God's absolute unity. The ineffability of the singular has led Western metaphysics to dismiss the singular and seek the universal. As Backman writes: "thisness, here-and-now-ness, or haecceity is regarded by the tradition of philosophy in a purely negative way as a residue that resists systematization" (71). By contrast, the task of post-metaphysical thought is to think the singularity of the thing as well as the singularity of Dasein as plural and heterogenous.

III. BEING$_1$, BEING$_2$, AND BEING$_3$

Backman's argument depends in large part on a distinction among what he calls "being$_1$," "being$_2$," and "being$_3$" which reveals a fundamental ambiguity in Heidegger's use of the term "being."

Being$_1$ corresponds to meaningful presence and accessibility. It is being as what metaphysics approaches in terms of beings and thinks *from out of* the plurality of beings. Fundamental ontology still understands being as meaningful presence by way of its multiple instances. In this sense, beingness is nothing radically different from beings. It is the common, the feature of beings by virtue of which they are.

Being$_2$ is no-thing. Aristotle acknowledged that the comprehensive being, the being of beings, resists determination. Only specific beings can be defined and determined. This leads to the insight that being is the *other* of beings, "nothing" in the sense of not-any-determinate-being. That which constitutes the presence of determinate instances of presence is not itself present in a determinate way. In its otherness to beings, being is the indeterminacy that allows determinacy. In *Wegmarken*, Heidegger writes "The nothing [*Nichts*] is the not [*Nicht*] of beings, and is thus being, experienced from the perspective of beings" (GA 9: 123/97). In this sense, being$_2$ releases beings by differing from them. Being as the no-thing is no longer simple indeterminate presence in contrast to the determinate presence of beings (Anaximander), it is the presence of non-presence that makes a foreground of presence possible.

Being$_3$ is beyng, i.e., the interplay of being$_1$ and being$_2$. Backman explains it as follows:

> Being in the third and most comprehensive sense is precisely the differentiation of background and foreground as such. It is the "temporalization" of a present in the ecstatic unity of timeliness, the emergence of something against the background of the nothing, the complication of the multidimensional background into the complicated unity of the foreground. (116)

By contrast with the universality of being$_1$, being$_3$ is the historical unfolding of meaningfulness in singular situations.

How can we understand the relation among these three? Just as in *Being and Time* the three ecstases of temporality have an "at-once-character," I take it that being$_1$, being$_2$, and being$_3$ are interrelated. But how? To understand this as a matter of semantic distinction raises some insurmountable difficulties: this would take us back to Aristotle's "being is *said* in many ways," and with this we are not questioning being anymore. Furthermore, a semantic plurality is perfectly compatible with an ontological unity, which, in a sense, it presupposes. If, on the other hand, we understand being$_1$, being$_{2,}$ and being$_3$ as properly ontological, wouldn't we have to assume an *ens commune* that they would have to share? None of these hypotheses is cogent. Backman suggests that being$_3$ contains both being$_1$ and being$_2$.

When, however, being$_3$ is considered in terms of this full fourfold dimensionality of the event that grants "beings," we attain a transitive sense of "is." What *is* is no longer beings or things, i.e., the *outcome* or foreground of the event of being$_3$. Rather, what truly *is* is being$_3$ itself in its full event structure as the differentiation of foreground and background. (182).

The "transitive sense of is" refers to dispensation (destination) of meaningful presence. In this sense, being$_3$ exhibits both singularity because of its uniqueness (its non-reiterability) and unity in the tensional interplay that lets background and foreground belong together.

Yet still another term is required: namely, Dasein. In *Contributions*, Heidegger argues that being and Dasein mutually define each other; the emergence of unconcealment from concealment is an event that appropriates the "there" (*Da*) of Dasein.

In conclusion, one of the great virtues of Backman's book is not that it solves some issues but that it raises new questions. Heidegger's thinking of *Ereignis* provides an account of the very happening of historical epochs whereby they come to be in the first place. *Ereignis* is that very granting of historical epochs that provides for the possibility of human history. *Ereignis* is that revelation and appropriation of meaningful

presence. Entire civilizations are themselves "epochal" in Heidegger's sense of the term. But doesn't this make *Ereignis* itself trans-historical and therefore a-temporal? Aren't we then led to assuming that temporality must be determined out of eternity? This hypothesis must be ruled out, of course. *Ereignis* is not an act of creation, it is at play throughout the historical unfolding of being; but insofar as it is this event that gives rise to history, it is not itself part of that history, but is rather the singularity that gives rise to history. But that "solution" (rethinking unity in terms of "singularity") doesn't solve anything. Are there many *Ereignisse* (each epoch having its own)? If so, what (if anything), is the unity of this plurality?

NOTES

1   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington, D.C.: Gateway Editions, 1962), 39.
2   Backman's translation.